

"WHEN GOD WANTS TO GIVE UP"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
May 24, 1987

Now we find God at His worst. The hurt becomes anger. The compassion is exchanged for vengeance. Consequently, justice calls for punishment. And suddenly, the God who once held Israel in her arms now accuses the people of their failure to act responsibly. Here are God's words:

"They shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities...and devour them in their fortresses. My people are bent on turning away from so; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it."

This is a picture of God who wants to give up on His people. This is a picture of a God who has decided to give up on His people. Let destruction follow, and may the people receive the punishment they deserve! We can almost hear the thunder in the heavens and we can almost see streaks of lightning flashing across the sky. The tumultuous anger of God has been pronounced and no one will escape it. And then, the mood of the text shifts again.

Time passes. How much time? We do not know. This is God's time. This next setting is calm-like; the thunderous anger that was once hovering over the northern kingdom has not moved away. We can almost picture this next scene as the dawn of a new morning. The clouds are gone, but there is still mist in the air. We can sense that the sun is wanting to come up, but it is as if God has something to say before He grants the sun permission to rise. Then, God speaks:

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel....My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger. I will not destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy.

And then God looks far into the horizon and begins to see tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrows. And God says:

"They shall go after the Lord, He will roar like a lion; yes, He will roar, and His sons shall come trembling from the West; they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their home, says the Lord".

This is the dramatic high point of the text, that the Lord's compassion overthrows His wrath, that the will to love overcomes the - to be sure, justified - will to punish. The drama is not acted out on the plane of history, but in the very heart of God. Here God is at His best.

From this marvelous passage, I have but one thing to say.

GOD DOESN'T GIVE UP ON GOD

Some years ago, comedian Bob Hope gave Southern Methodist University a large sum of money to construct a theater on the campus. Dr. Willis Tate, then President of the University, offered brief remarks upon receipt of the check. Among other things, Dr. Tate quoted a verse from Scripture, but he added a new twist.

"I want to remind you" he said, "that these three things abide: faith, hope and love - but the greatest of these is HOPE".

I thought you'd appreciate that one. Today's text is the story of hope. It reminds us that our greatest hope is that when God gives up on us, God doesn't give up on God.

The turning of the Lord's will is not due to human activity. Typically, prophetic announcements of salvation do not give human works as reasons for the good news. The reason is, "For I am God and not a human being...the Holy One in your midst...and I will not come to destroy". On the highest and most generous scales of human justice, Yahweh was justified in executing punishment, but divine justice transcends human capacities for either justice or love.

Indeed, the radical difference between God and human beings lies not in power, but in the capacity to withhold judgement, to love even those who have been unfaithful.

This is a story about God. We are reminded that God is God and not a human being. Can I in common sense turn to you this morning and ask that you go and do likewise? I could, but it would be to no avail. After all, you and I are human beings and not God.

Hosea presents this soliloquy without calling for a response. What is its effect on its hearers? Certainly it reminds them of the history of their God's care for them and confronts them with their own faithlessness. But how can we react to the divine compassion, to God's radical change of heart? Such is the question the prophet leaves with all who read or hear this text.

This much we can do...this much we can say to everyone who is a human being and not God: our greatest hope is that when God gives up on us, God doesn't give up on God.

That line from O'Neill's play is true. Hear it again:

"We are born broken, but we can live by mending, because the grace of God is the glue".

Thank God for it. Praise the Lord. Amen!

PRAYER

For the love and the mercy that we find at the heart of all life, we thank you, O God. For the love that will never let us go nor let us down, we bless You, O God. Let that love be in us and let it mend us, even now, in this hour as we bring to you our problems, our pain, our suffering...knowing that you are at work in the healing and the mending. Amen.

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### INTRODUCTION

In one of Eugene O'Neill's plays, there is a line upon which your life can begin again. Therefore, let those with ears, hear.

"This is the secret for today: Man is broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is the glue".

This morning's text is the story about God. It is not simply just another story amongst other stories. Today's text is God's story. It sheds light on who God is and what God fundamentally does with His creation. Here is a picture of God at His worst and here is a picture of God at His best.

### HOSEA

The prophet Hosea spoke to the people of the northern kingdom. He had lived with them and knew them well. At the time of his prophecy, the northern kingdom was suffering from war with Assyria. The entire nation was in disarray and in virtual anarchy. The once faithful people had turned to other Gods and worship idols. They had forgotten Yahweh and had fallen into corruption. It was the worst of times.

The eleventh chapter of Hosea is a divine soliloquy, in which the prophet hears God meditating and deliberating on His relationship to the Chosen People. From the beginning, we are led to expect something different. In the first four verses, Yahweh recalls the Exodus from Egypt and the text utilizes the metaphor of a parent's care for a child. Like a father calls a son, or a mother teaches a daughter to walk or takes her in her arms, so Yahweh cared for Israel. But for all of this care, Israel was unfaithful and turned away from God.

Listen again to these words which so dramatically picture God in His suffering:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me...yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk...I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them."

God gave His people everything. This is a very maternal picture of a God who calls Her people into safety, then holds them in Her arms, and then with compassion feeds them. In brokenness and despair, God recalls that Her people "did not know that (she) healed them."

### REFLECTIONS ON THIS

Have you ever befriended someone, have you ever helped someone climb out of their pit, have you ever been there when someone needed you and cried out to you and leaned on you, only to be deserted by them once they got back upon their feet? Can you remember the isolation, the hurt, the sudden sadness that you felt when such a person deserted you after you had reached out to them and befriended them? This is the picture of God that we find in these first four verses. God was a friend who had been deserted. And then the mood of our text shifts dramatically.

Now we find God at His worst. The hurt becomes anger. The compassion is exchanged for vengeance. Consequently, justice calls for punishment. And suddenly, the God who once held Israel in her arms now accuses the people of their failure to act responsibly. Here are God's words:

"They shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities...and devour them in their fortresses. My people are bent on turning away from so; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it."

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